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Welz, Claudia

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Rethinking Reformation

Claudia Welz*

Freedom, Responsibility, and Religion in Public Life: From Luther to Levinas and Arendt

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Abstract: While Luther affirmed the believer's freedom in relation to the world, he described the human being as unfree in relation to God from whom we receive everything and without whom we can achieve nothing good. This article reconsiders the relation between autonomy and heteronomy in the context of a phenomenology of listening: if faith comes from listening (*ex auditu*) and *auditus* is not a human capacity, but rather the effect of God's Word that operates within the human being, how is our (un)freedom to be understood? Further, if a human being's self-relation is expressed by the 'voice' of conscience, which can be ignored only at the cost of losing the unity with oneself, how is responsibility to be conceptualized when the call comes both from 'within' and from 'without'? Finally, what are the implications of this view of the person for the role of religion in public life and the ways in which religious conflicts can be resolved? In an anachronistic thought experiment, Luther is brought into a posthumous dialogue with those that he excluded from the discussion: the Jews. In particular, his view concerning the just-mentioned questions is contrasted with insights by Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt.

Keywords: Autonomy/heteronomy, faith, sin, doubt, listening, obedience, responsiveness, conscience, God's Word

The present article[1] focuses on three interrelated themes, which concern a person's God-relationship, self-relation, and relations to others: (1) Commenting on Genesis 22, Martin Luther points out that God contradicts Himself when commanding Abraham to 'bind' and sacrifice his only son. Immanuel Kant and Emmanuel Levinas doubted whether the heavenly voice Abraham 'heard' was God's voice at all. How can we know whether it is God Himself who speaks – in particular if His message is conveyed in human words? While Luther affirmed the believer's freedom in relation to the world, he described the human being as unfree in relation to God from whom we receive everything and without whom we can achieve nothing good.[2] The relation between autonomy and heteronomy will be reconsidered in the context of a phenomenology of listening: if faith comes from listening (*ex auditu,* cf. Romans 10:17) and *auditus* is not a human capacity, but rather the effect of God's Word that operates within the human being, how is our (un)freedom to be understood? (2) Further, if a human being's self-relation is expressed by the 'voice' of

1 This article is the revised version of a keynote lecture presented at the conference *RETHINK Reformation* at Aarhus University on November 2, 2017.

2 According to *De servo arbitrio,* the will's freedom (*arbitrium liberum*) extends only to *inferiora,* things that are subordinate to us and can be grasped by human reason, but does not pertain to *superiora,* the things that are 'beyond' us, see Luther, WA 18, 781, 8ff (WA = *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe),* ed. Joachim Karl Friedrich Knaake et al. (127 vols). Weimar: Hermann Böhlau und Nachfolger, 1883-1999, quoted with the number of volume, page, and possibly line). Cf. Luther, "Der große Katechismus," 311.

***Corresponding author: Claudia Welz,** University of Copenhagen, Denmark; Email: cwe@teol.ku.dk

conscience, which can be ignored only at the cost of losing the unity with oneself, how is responsibility to be conceptualized when the call comes both from 'within' and from 'without'? (3) Finally, what are the implications and consequences of this view of the person for the role of religion in public life and the ways in which religious conflicts can be resolved?

Many of the activities that took place on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 were designed to praise Luther and Lutheranism. Yet research in Reformation history and theology has also (and even more sharply than before) brought Luther's dark sides to light, which we can*not* celebrate, but only deplore – for instance his hate speeches against the Jews.[3] In my attempt to 'rethink' the Reformation, I have picked out three controversial themes, namely freedom,[4] responsibility, and the role of religion in public life. Luther has given us a lot of food for thought, but today we can hardly adopt his opinion on these interrelated themes without serious revisions. In what follows, I will outline how Lutheran theology could be improved by listening to those that Luther himself excluded from the discussion: the Jews. In an anachronistic thought experiment, Luther will be brought into a posthumous dialogue with Levinas and Hannah Arendt about the just-mentioned issues.

1 Human freedom and faith in God

Let us first turn to the topic of freedom, which, for Luther, is closely linked to faith in God.

1.1 Freedom from… and freedom to… – a gift and a task

In his 1520 *Tractatus de libertate christiana,* his "Treatise on Christian Liberty,"[5] which consists of a series of theses and explanations, Luther defines the freedom of a Christian through the following two propositions, which seem to contradict each other: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[6] These propositions in Luther's first thesis are found to fit together in a non-paradoxical way insofar as they apply to different respects: Christians are freed from the condemning power of sin through faith in God – and this inner freedom raises them above worldly authorities; yet Christians are, at the same time, others' servants insofar as they are bound by love to serve their neighbors.[7]

Luther's second thesis concerns the twofold nature of the human being and the duplexity of simultaneous freedom and servitude. On the one hand, the human being is free as "a spiritual, new, and inner man"[8] who in interiority remains independent of external influence. Accordingly, in a rhetorical question, Luther asks: "how will poor health or imprisonment or hunger or thirst or any other external misfortune harm the

3 Luther's writings about the Jews include *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* (1523) and *Against the Sabbatarians* (1538); his main anti-Jewish writings were written in 1543: *The Jews and their Lies; The last Words of David*; and *Von Schem Hamphoras*. His polemical text *The Jews and their Lies* was investigated critically by, e.g., Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden;* Kremers, *Die Juden und Martin Luther*; van der Osten-Sacken, *Martin Luther und die Juden*; Kaufmann, *Luthers "Judenschriften"*; Hendrix, "Review of: Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers Judenschriften: Ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung*"; Evangelische Akademie Loccum et al. (eds.), *Martin Luther und die Juden: Luthers Judenschriften und ihre Rezeption*; Luther and Morgenstern, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen*. As for the history of reception in Protestant theology throughout the centuries, see Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*; Wendebourg, Stegmann and Ohst (eds.), *Protestantismus, Antijudaismus, Antisemitismus*; Leppin, "Pfefferkorn, Reuchlin und Luther" (for more details, see the bibliography attached to this article).

4 As for the ecumenical aspects of this issue, see Pesch, "Free by Faith," and Pesch, "Om et kristenmenneskes frihed. Det økumeniske tema."

5 Luther, WA 7, 49-73 / LW 31, 327-377 (LW = *Luther's Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (vols. 1-30) and Helmut T. Lehmann (vols. 31-55). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, and Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1900-86). The by now classical commentary and discussion of Luther's understanding of the 'inner' vs. 'outer' human being by Jüngel, *Zur Freiheit eines Christenmenschen,* is still worth reading. See also Kern, "Freiheit als 'Vermächtnis der Reformation.'"

6 Luther, LW 31, 344.

7 See ibid., 330.

8 Ibid., 344.

soul?"[9] On the other hand, however, the human being is characterized as a carnal, old, and outward man according to the bodily nature that is directed to exteriority.[10] Luther here combines or even mixes up two pairs of distinctions: the 'inner' vs. 'the outer' and the 'new' vs. 'the old.' For this reason, he ends up with equivocations: the spirit of the 'spiritual man' can both denote the soul (*anima/spiritus*) as opposed to the body (*corpus*) and the Pauline spirit of God (*pneuma*) as opposed to the flesh (*sarx*) of the sinner.[11]

This is confusing because 'spirit' in the context of the first-mentioned dichotomy defines only a part of the person (namely that part which is immaterial), while it in the context of the last-mentioned dichotomy determines the person as a whole (in that he or she is freed from sin through the reign of God's spirit sanctifying the sinner).[12] If the human being is to be seen in a holistic way, sin cannot be reduced to the 'outward' bodily life, and the freedom from sin cannot be reduced to a person's 'inner' psychic life. Just as sin affects everything including human reason (which Luther elsewhere insultingly calls a 'whore'[13]), so does the liberation from sin change the whole interaction between the 'inner' and the 'outer' being in all its complexities. It transfigures both the body and the soul, our thinking 'within' and our acting upon the world 'without.' Therefore, inwardness is not to be understood as an inner retreat that would be separate from the world outside, but rather as a mental maneuvering room in which we move *in relating* to ourselves and others.[14]

While theses no. 3-18 of Luther's treatise deal with the freedom of the inner man, theses no. 19-30 deal with the servitude of the outward man. Yet we learn that even the so-called 'servitude' is a kind of freedom. While the freedom of the inner man is *freedom from…,* the servitude of the outward man is *freedom to…*

Let us have a closer look at some examples. The inner man's freedom is not only freedom from sins, but also from having to conform to the laws of the church and demands put on us by other authorities. Freedom from the requirements of man-made laws – just as the freedom from the condemning power of 'the (divine) Law' as opposed to 'the Gospel' – implies freedom from the pressure to perform. The sinner who does not live up to the standard of the Law is still embraced by God's forgiving grace. Remember that, in Luther's opinion, everyone is a sinner, though not all of us acknowledge it. According to Luther, it is because of God's Word that the soul is free (cf. thesis 5), in particular because of His promise, which assures our peace of mind (cf. thesis 9). The human soul becomes united with the word to which it listens, such that the soul comes to resemble this word (cf. theses 10-14). Even suffering and death must serve the Christians for good;

9 Ibid., 345.

10 See ibid., 344.

11 See Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther,* 163-232.

12 See Welz, "Frihed til kærlighed hos Luther og Kierkegaard," 100-111, 120f. Schempp, "Die christliche Freiheit nach Luther," 209, has concisely defined Christian liberty as divine-human freedom of the new creature *within* the old man, and of the spirit *in* the flesh/body: *Christliche Freiheit ist die gottmenschliche Freiheit Gottes, die der Christ als neue Kreatur in der alten glaubt, sie ist also die Freiheit des Geistes im Fleische*. Schempp (ibid., 215) portrays freedom and servitude as *totale Größen* that together make up the nature of the Christian who is totally free (in faith) and at the same time totally serving (in love). In this way, faith in Christ turns into the love of neighbor, and Christian liberty is freedom from the Law *in* the implementation of the Law: *Freiheit vom Gesetz im Vollzug des Gesetzes* (ibid., 214). In the same vein, Ebeling clarifies that the apparent anthropological dualism is to be understood in a Pauline key: as the fight of the old and the new, the spirit and the flesh, within one and the same human being ("Die königlich-priesterliche Freiheit" in: *Lutherstudien,* vol. III, 157-180, here 166). Ebeling refers to WA 50, 10-12 (*Daß weltliche Oberkeit den Wiedertäufern mit leiblicher Strafe zu wehren schuldig sei, Etlicher Bedenken zu Wittenberg*, 1536), where Luther alludes to Paul's letter to the Galatians: "Haec diversitas facit, ut in scripturis pugnantia de eodem homine dicantur, cum et ipsi duo homines in eodem homine sibi pugnent, dum caro concupiscit adversus spiritum et spiritus adversus carnem [Gal 5,17]."

13 See, for instance WA 51, 129, 19f and 29 (sermon held on January 17, 1546): "Hoerestu es, du schebichte, aussetzige hure, du heilige vernunfft, […]" (*Predigten 1545/46*). Cf., however, LW 34, 137 (*Disputatio de homine,* 1536), where reason is praised, see theses 4-8: "4. And it is certainly true that reason is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine. 5. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possess in this life. 6. By virtue of this fact it ought to be named the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things. 7. Holy Scripture also makes it lord over the earth, birds, fish, and cattle, saying, 'Have dominion' [Gen. 1:28]. 8. That is, that it is a sun and a kind of god appointed to administer these things in this life."

14 See Grøn, "Subjectivity, Interiority and Exteriority: Kierkegaard and Levinas," 16f.

nothing can harm them (cf. thesis 15). They have the power to pray for others, and God hears their prayer (cf. thesis 16). Hence, Christians are free in relation to God insofar as they can address themselves confidently to Him and be sure that He will answer them; in relation to the world, Christians do not reign like earthly kings who rule over other people, but rather in the sense that everything that contests faith is already defeated spiritually in Christ.[15] Only as a *homo audiens,* as a human being who listens to God's Word, can the 'inner man' enjoy Christian freedom.

In terms of their outward nature, Christians are subordinate to God's commandments, which they are obliged to follow, and to other human beings, owing them to do good works for their benefit and to love them as they love themselves. Moreover, Christians shall control the body, so that it corresponds to the inner man (cf. thesis 20). If the inner man succeeds to rule over the outward man, the body can become an instrument to carry out the works of love. Hence, the outward man's servitude is equivalent to the freedom to help his or her neighbor (cf. thesis 27), which is an ethical empowerment that derives from God's justification of the sinner.

Luther ends his treatise with the statement that "the good things have flowed" from Christ "and are flowing into us"; and in this line, thesis 30 reads as follows: "We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. [...] He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up[16] beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love [...]."[17] This thesis implies two kinds of freedom: freedom as God's gift (i.e. faith) and freedom as the human being's task (i.e. love of neighbor, which springs from faith).

Here it becomes clear that the inner man's inwardness is not self-centered but opened up widely to embrace those around oneself. Furthermore, inwardness is not limited to the spot where one stands right now, but entails movements that direct one away from oneself, towards others and towards God, the incomparable Other.

1.2 Unfreedom – and the liberation of the enslaved will

Seen from an ecumenical perspective, what is most contentious in Luther's theology is not his description of Christian freedom, but rather his dramatic depiction of the sinner's unfreedom in relation to God. Has he not overstated the power of sin? In particular the following three features of sin have provoked discussions:

(1) *Sin as self-enclosing aversion from God*: For Luther, the basic sin is not a certain deed, but rather unbelief as the fundamental aversion from God and the lack of wholehearted dedication to Him.[18] This so-called *peccatum originale, radicale, principale, personale, naturale* or *substantiale* is the origin and root of every single actual sin, the *opus peccati*.[19] Unbelief is, in Luther's eyes, "the real capital sin" that is not committed just for a time and in a place, but lasts as long as the human being lives.[20] Sin is rooted in the person, and therefore it determines everything the person does. Note that sin is not only the *malefactum* or wrongdoing, a moral mistake; rather, the 'good works' can be sinful as well, if they are only done to distinguish oneself in pride or hubris. In Luther's view, human nature is ruled by sin, and for this reason

15 See Ebeling, "Die königlich-priesterliche Freiheit" in: *Lutherstudien,* vol. III, 174f.

16 This is the translation of the Latin word *rapitur* in *Luther's Works*; as to my own suggestion, see section 1.2.

17 LW 31, 371.

18 Cf. WA 18, 782, 13-15 (*De servo arbitrio,* 1525): "Hic [John 16:9] vides peccatum esse, non credere in Christum." See WA 42, 122, 12-17 (*Genesisvorlesung, cap. 1-7,* 1535/38): "Radix igitur et fons peccati est incredulitas et aversio a Deo, Sicut e contra fons iusticiae et radix est fides." For a systematic analysis of Luther's understanding of sin and his usage of the traditional terms, see Ebeling, "Der Mensch als Sünder: Die Erbsünde in Luthers Menschenbild" in: *Lutherstudien,* vol. III, 74-107.

19 Cf. WA 39/I, 84, 10f ("D. Martini Lutheri quarta disputatio [de loco Rom. 3,28]," *Die Disputation de iustificatione,* 1536); WA 8, 104, 6f (*Rationis Latomianae confutatio,* 1521); WA 56, 271, 13-15 (*Römervorlesung (Hs.), Die Scholien,* 1515/16): "Ita peccatum est ipsa declination a bono et inclination ad malum. Et opera peccati fructus sunt huius peccati."

20 WA 10/I.1, 508, 20f (*Weihnachtspostille,* 1522).

human beings sin whenever they do what they are able to accomplish out of themselves alone: "Homo, quando facit quod in se est, peccat [...]."[21] Luther often criticizes that we want to be self-sufficient instead of acknowledging that we are in need of God. Luther interprets the Fall of Man as an event that has irreversibly spoiled humanity, which therefore must be redeemed from sin. Our nature is corrupt because of its tendency to self-enclosure or self-incursion, its *incurvatio in seipsum*.[22]

(2) *Sin as enslavement of the will*: Moreover, Luther is of the opinion that sin enslaves the will. In his treatise on the servile will, *De servo arbitrio* (1525), he questions the idea of a *liberum arbitrium* in the sense of a neutral power that helps us to make a rational choice between a life related or unrelated to God. For Luther, the will is a permanent power of willing that already has a definite direction: we find ourselves as sinners before we could choose to be or not to be captives of sin. Luther does not deny that we can decide and act freely in worldly matters and that we, for example, can choose between building a house and planting a vineyard.[23] But due to the passive, affective and receptive dimension of willing, the sinner's will cannot escape sin, cannot simply give up the search for its own glory and intend to act according to God's will.[24] For such a change, the will must be turned around.

(3) *Sin as self-deception*: For the most part, the sinner is not even aware of sinning, and once this is the case, he or she prefers to ignore it. For this reason, Luther underlines that we have to *believe* that we are sinners and *become* sinners in recognizing ourselves as the sinners we are.[25] This is impossible as long as we are blind to our being in sin and as long as we do not realize our selfishness in sin.

How, then, can the unfreedom *in* sin be transformed into the freedom *from* sin? The Latin formulations in *De libertate christiana* are telling: "Christianum [...] per fidem sursum *rapitur* supra se in deum"[26] – and the passive verb form indicates that it is not the Christian him- or herself who performs this movement of being snatched away from oneself and being carried beyond oneself to God. Rather, the lifelong transition from self-centeredness to being moved closer to God is attributed to faith, which Luther elsewhere has praised as "a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God"; furthermore, faith "kills the old Adam, makes us altogether different beings in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly."[27] Interestingly, in this passage faith appears both as an object ("a divine work" resulting from God's activity) and as a subject (an agent "doing good works" and transforming us). Here we can get the impression that faith just happens to us without us contributing to it. If this is so, can we then ascribe freedom to ourselves at all?

No, we cannot, and this 'No' has been the stumbling block for many philosophical minds ever since the motto 'freed by faith' was proclaimed, which summarizes Luther's theological anthropology.[28] Strictly speaking, Luther does not promote *human* freedom at all, since freedom is regarded as a *divine* attribute, which exclusively appertains to God.[29] Needless to say, this has been a huge provocation – not only for

21 WA 1, 148, 14f, see WA 1, 145, 24 (*Quaestio de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia disputata*, 1516.) and WA 40/3, 223a, 5-7 ("[In XV Psalmos gradium]," *Vorlesung über die Stufenpsalmen*, 1532/33): "Das ist vitium humanae naturae, quod non putat creationem et dona, sed vult ein feci draus machen; sed sol heissen: Ego accepi, Dominus dedit; Non: homo fecit."

22 Cf. WA 56, 356, 5 (*Römervorlesung (Hs.), Die Scholien*, 1515/16), and WA 56, 325 / LW 25, 313 (*Römervorlesung (Hs.), Die Scholien*, 1515/16) on the sinner's crookedness and curvedness.

23 WA 18, 638 (*De servo arbitrio*, 1525); cf. ibid., 672, 752, 781.

24 WA 18, 634f (ibid.); cf. ibid., 675, 684, 698, 709f, 742f, 750f.

25 WA 56, 231, 6f (*Römervorlesung (Hs.), Die Scholien*, 1515/16): "Credere tamen oportet, quod sumus peccatores." Cf. WA 3, 288, 6f (*Dictata super Psalterium*, 1513/16): "Tunc fimus peccatores, quando tales nos esse agnoscimus, quia tales coram deo sumus."

26 WA 7, 69, 12-14 (*Epistola Lutheriana ad Leonem Decimum summum pontificem. Tractatus de libertate christiana*, 1520). Emphasis mine.

27 WA.DB 7, 10, 6-12 (*Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* in Luther's German Bible, 1522): "Aber glawb ist eyn gotlich werck ynn vns, das vns wandelt vnd new gepirt aus Gott, Johan. 1 vnd todtet den allten Adam, macht vns gantz ander menschen von hertz, mut, synn, vnd allen krefften, vnnd bringet den heyligen geyst mit sich, O es ist eyn lebendig, schefftig, thettig, mechtig ding vmb den glawben, das vnmuglich ist, das er nicht on vnterlas solt gutts wircken, er fraget auch nicht ob gutte werck zu thun sind, sondern ehe man fragt, hat er sie than."

28 This section draws on Pesch, "Free by Faith," especially 24f, 28-37, 40-44, 50.

29 Cf. WA 18, 636, 27-30 (*De servo arbitrio*, 1525): "Sequitur [...] liberum arbitrium esse plane divinum nomen [...]."

Luther's contemporaries who, like Erasmus of Rotterdam, were influenced by Renaissance humanism, but also for us today, who read Luther against the backdrop of Enlightenment thinking.

In his *Disputatio de homine* (*Disputation Concerning Man,* 1536), Luther defines the human being as the one who deserted God and is in need of justification.[30] In general, he portrays a pessimistic picture of the human being *coram deo*: even the justified sinner is *simul iustus et peccator,*[31] righteous and a sinner at the same time, in the sense that the sin remains and that the sinner is righteous only through God's act of non-imputation, that is, by the fact that God does not reckon sin as condemning.[32] Judging God's judgment higher than one's own, this means to have faith. The sinner who realizes that (s)he is accepted by God's grace is freed from the condemning power of sin. Sin can then no longer separate the human being from God because God has rendered it ineffective.[33] This opens the way for the renewal of the person who becomes gradually changed, so that sin recedes, while joy and trust in God shape the life of the believer more and more.

As we have seen in *De libertate christiana,* faith as the 'highway' to God in heaven is also the direct way to the neighbor. Luther's point is that the freedom to live *with* and *against* sin is freedom granted by faith. This includes freedom from the compulsion to achieve the meaning of one's life by one's own power, and the release from one's own failures. Moreover, the liberation from the care for oneself leads to the inner freedom to serve one's fellow human beings. Yet in order to become ready to freely take upon oneself this 'servitude,' God's intervention is necessary.

As Luther explains in *De servo arbitrio*, the passivity of being-moved applies to all our willing, be it that we will what is good or what is evil: "*rapitur* omnium voluntas, ut velit et faciat, sive sit bona sive mala."[34] Attend to Luther's choice of words: he uses, again, the passive verb *rapitur,* and it is not us ourselves determining what we are willing. Rather, the very will (*voluntas*) that is torn passively in one or the other direction, towards good or evil (*sive sit bona sive mala*), thus being subjected to a higher power, is nonetheless the subject of willing and doing (*ut velit et faciat*). It follows that it is not up to our own acts of cognition and decision, whether our life becomes determined by the 'flesh' or the 'spirit'; rather, an affective determination precedes and pervades our power of rational self-determination.[35] We cannot turn ourselves to God before He has turned to us. Yet after God having turned to us, our turning away from Him is sin, whereas our letting us be converted through faith can transfigure us. In fact, Luther suggests that God does not work in us without us (*non operatur in nobis sine nobis*) because God has created and preserved us

30 Cf. WA 39/I, 175-180 (the 32nd thesis of the *Disputatio de homine*, 1536): "Arbitramur hominem iustificari fide absque operibus, breviter hominis definitionem colligit dicens: hominem justificari fide."

31 The formula appears in a number of variations, see e.g. WA 56, 70, 9f (*Römervorlesung (Hs.), Die Glossen*, 1515) ; WA 57, 165, 12 (*Römervorlesung (Nss.)*, 1515/16; WA 2, 496, 39 (*In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas M. Lutheri commentaries*, 1519); WA 7, 337, 26-35 (*Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers, so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind*, 1521); WA 38, 205b, 17-31 (*Von der Winkelmesse und Pfaffenweihe*, 1533); WA 39/I, 83, 18f ("D. Martini Lutheri tertia disputatio [de loco Rom. 3, 28] Alia ratio iustificandi hominis coram Deo, alia coram hominibus etc," *Die Disputation de iustificatione, Die Thesen*, 14. Januar 1536?); WA 39/I, 177, 11f; 507, 12-508, 9; 563, 8-564, 7 (*Disputationen*, 1535/38).

32 Cf. WA 56, 272 (*Römervorlesung (Hs.), Die Scholien,* 1515/16); WA 2, 469 (*In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas M. Lutheri commentarius*, 1519); WA 39/I, 492 and 563 (*Disputationen*, 1535/38); WA 5, 250, 26-29.32-34 (*Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519/21): "Ita nemo Christianus est iustus iustitia sua, sed deo data iustitiae gloria in oculis suis et hominum cum iniquis reputatur, ut in humilitate iudicium eius sublevetur."

33 At other places, Luther writes that the 'old Adam' is still alive, although sin has lost its lethal power. Cf. "Der große Katechismus," 704.

34 WA 18, 747, 34f (*De servo arbitrio*, 1525). Emphasis mine.

35 Luther expresses the inability to change one's own heart by means of a rhetorical question: "Woltest du der Man sein, das du deines hertzens mechtig werest?" (WA 33, 284b, 39f, *Wochenpredigten über Joh. 6–8*, 1530/32) We remain in the state of unbelief "so lang bis uns Gott andere menschen macht und den glauben ynns hertz gibt" (WA 24, 57, 34f, *Über das erste Buch Mose, Predigten sampt einer Unterricht, wie Moses zu leren ist*, 1527). In this process the heart is renewed: "grund und boden meines hertzen wird vernewert und geendert" (WA 45, 667, 24f, *Das XIV. und XV. Capitel S. Johannis durch D. Mart. Luther gepredigt und ausgelegt*, 1537).

in order that God might work in us and we might cooperate with God (*et nos ei cooperaremur*).[36]

Provided that Christians remain sinners as long as they live, can they do anything to avoid sinning? Luther's view that human beings do not have a free will (*arbitrium*) in matters concerning salvation or condemnation because our willing (*voluntas*) is not so much a volitional faculty, but rather a being-moved-in-willing, while the direction in which we are moved is determined by whether we are in God's or Satan's sphere of power, might prompt the conclusion that we are helplessly subjected to a metaphysical power play. Luther's infamous comparison of the human will to a riding animal that is either 'ridden' by God or by Satan and that has to yield to the will of the respective 'rider'[37] might reinforce our feeling of powerlessness and push us to accept Luther's view of a *servum arbitrium*.

However, the fact that Luther also uses other metaphors to describe human unfreedom, for instance the image of the *homo incurvatus in se*, who is not forced into unfreedom by coercion through higher powers, but who enslaves him- or herself through his or her own thoughts and actions, suggests that we nonetheless have a share in our unfreedom. If human beings really were like donkeys, they would not even be able to apply this metaphor to themselves, which, in turn, implies that our unfreedom as sinners nonetheless contains some freedom to distance ourselves from ourselves. As soon as we have gained insight into our condition and can verbalize it in the way Luther has done, we are free to employ the metaphor differently, for instance such that the donkey throws the rider… In any case, the discrepancy between the content and the possible applications of the metaphor discloses the performative self-contradiction of the one who sees himself as a donkey and uses this as an excuse for not resisting against the driving or oppressing forces.[38]

One's own contribution to one's being oppressed by sin can, however, first come to view when one already has imagined that it is possible to dethrone Satan, just as a riding animal can unsaddle the rider. In favor of Luther one might concede that this can only happen if the power of sin is already broken, and that his comparison only makes sense retrospectively when the unfreedom of the will in sin is seen from the perspective of faith. An atheist would hardly want to be seen as someone who is 'ridden' by either God or the devil. Yet there is another issue in regard to which it becomes more difficult to defend Luther: his overemphasis of sin has made him blind to the possibility that those who are freed by faith can also take the blame for their still being captive in sin. Once it is acknowledged that the sinner is responsible for *not* letting God work in him- or herself,[39] for *hindering* God's work and *refusing* to cooperate with Him, the idea that the human being is capable of acting freely not only in worldly matters, but also in relation to God, is reclaimed – at least from the point of time when a person regards him- or herself as a justified sinner who *can* pray to God and ask for forgiveness.

Based on the previous considerations, I want to contest Luther's binary division into freedom *coram mundo* and unfreedom *coram deo* or *diabolo* – for how can any area of life be exempted from faith or from sin, if the God-relationship affects *all* dimensions of human existence?

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36 WA 18, 754, 1-6, (*De servo arbitrio*, 1525): "Sicut homo, antequam creatur, ut sit homo, nihil facit aut conatur, quo fiat creatura, Deinde factus et creatus nihil facit aut conatur, quo perseveret creatura, Sed utrunque fit sola voluntate omnipotentis virtutis et bonitatis Dei nos sine nobis creantis et conservantis, sed non operatur in nobis sine nobis, ut quos ad hoc creavit et servavit, ut in nobis operaretur et nos ei cooperaremur […]."

37 Cf. WA 18, 635, 17-22 (ibid.): "Sic humana voluntas in medio posita est, ceu iumentum, si insederit Deus, vult et vadit, quo vult Deus, ut Psalmus [73 (72), 22f] dicit: Factus sum sicut iumentum et ego semper tecum. Si insederit Satan, vult et vadit, quo vult Satan, nec est in eius arbitrio ad utrum sessorem currere aut eum quaerere, sed ipsi sessores certant ob ipsum obtinendum et possidendum." Ebeling, "Der kontroverse Grund der Freiheit" in: *Lutherstudien,* vol. III, 366-394, here 394, calls attention to the fact that Luther has inherited the metaphor of the will as a riding animal from scholastic theologians such as Gabriel Biel who used it in order to depict the harmonious 'team play' of the human will and God's grace. Both the rider and the horse have a share in attaining the destination one has in view (Ebeling refers to Biel, *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarium,* II dist. 27 q. un. a 3 dub. 2). At one place, Luther, too, used the contentious metaphor in a positive way, describing Christ as sitting enthroned on our will, which bears him serenely thanks to his grace, obeys him with pleasure and serves him freely (cf. WA 7, 473, 34-36, (*Enarrationes epistolarum et euangeliorum, quas postillas vocant*, 1521).

38 Thanks to Arne Grøn, who pointed this out in a conversation in 2010.

39 Cf. WA 40/I, 610b, 17f ("In epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas Commentarius ex praelectione D. Martini Lutheri collectus," *Galatervorlesung (cap. 1–4)*, 1531): "Nostrum agere est pati operantem in nobis Deum […]." See also WA 40/I, 597b, 28f: "Verum ista mere passive nobis obvenit, nihil enim facimus, sed patimur nos fieri et formari novam creaturam per fidem in verbum." Cf. WA 5, 176, 1-14 (*Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519/21), and the comments by Härle, *Menschsein in Beziehungen,* 139-142, 144.

2 Responsibility between listening and responding

In regard to sin, we are confronted with the paradox of human freedom making itself unfree. Here the challenge consists in accepting one's own responsibility despite the limitations of one's freedom, and in seeing oneself as an agent who simultaneously has to take a stance before God and before the world. The next question is, then, how we can take upon ourselves our responsibility.

2.1 Listening to God's 'call' – beyond the alternative between autonomy and heteronomy

Let us reconsider the God-relationship and its intertwinement with interhuman relations in the context of a phenomenology of listening: if faith comes from listening and is effected by God's Word operating within the human being,[40] how is the relation between autonomy or heteronomy to be understood? To anticipate my answer to this question: in taking upon ourselves our responsibility, we get beyond this alternative.

Commenting on Genesis 22 – the *Akedat Yitzchak*, the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac – in his *Genesisvorlesung* (1535/45), his lecture course on the first book of the Bible, Luther himself seems to question the Reformation principle of *claritas scripturae*, the clarity of the Holy Scripture whose various parts are thought to illuminate each other. Luther points out that God contradicted Himself when commanding Abraham to 'bind' and slaughter his only son – a command that is opposed against the prohibition to kill (Exodus 20:13) and against God's promise that Isaac will become the father of many children.[41] Moreover, Luther holds that God showed Himself to be Abraham's enemy and a tyrant.[42] Abraham, however, resisted the God who tested him (cf. Genesis 22:1[43]) and, by holding on to God's *promissio*, he became a role model for all believers.[44] How could Abraham orient himself in a situation where God's Word had become self-contradictory?

What is most conspicuous in the biblical narrative is Abraham's silence. He did not discuss God's command with any other human being. He said nothing about it to anyone. Abraham listened to God, and each time he was called by Him (or by the angel of the Lord respectively), he replied: "*Hinneni* – Here I am" (Genesis 22:1.11).

Apparently, Abraham was not in doubt that he was addressed by God Himself. And the biblical account speaks against any attempts to separate God's voice from the tempter's voice and to pit *Elohim* against the angel of *YHWH*, since the voice that "called to Abraham from heaven a second time" (Genesis 22:15) agrees perfectly with the voice that called him the first time and blesses Abraham and his offspring with the explanation: "because you have obeyed me" (Genesis 22:18).[45] Nonetheless, Kant[46] as well as Levinas

40 Cf. Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, 280-310, 355-394.

41 Cf. WA 43, 202, 16-18 (*Genesisvorlesung*, *cap. 8–30*, 1535/42): "Haec tentatio non potest vinci, et longe maior est, quam a nobis possit compraehendi. Est enim contradictio, qua ipse Deus sibi ipsi contradicit, hoc carni impossibile est intelligere." Cf. WA 43, 201, 30-32 (ibid.): "Deus enim manifeste hic sibi ipsi contradicit: quomodo enim convenient haec: 'in Isaac vocabitur tibi semen', et 'tolle filium tuum, et macta eum'." On this topic see the excellent article by Steiger, "Ad Deum contra Deum. Zur Exegese von Genesis 22 bei Luther und im Luthertum der Barockzeit," especially 138-145.

42 Cf. WA 43, 202, 41f (ibid.): "Deus, qui antea summus amicus videbatur: nunc videtur factus inimicus et Tyrannus."

43 "Some time later God tested Abraham." All English quotes from the Bible are according to the NIV (New International Version).

44 The situation was highly ambiguous. Abraham could not know that God was 'only' testing him. He did not receive any proof of God's trustworthiness before he took the risk of counting on Him despite everything that counted against placing his trust in God, surmising that He wants us to flourish, not to perish. Cf. Welz, *Vertrauen und Versuchung*, 158-177.

45 According to Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac*, Chapter 10, 129, the voice that *commanded* the sacrifice (*Elohim*) was another voice than the voice that *precluded* the sacrifice (*YHWH*). Boehm concludes (ibid., 136): "The survival of Abraham's seed was not the result of his readiness to kill the beloved son – it was the result of his refusal to do so." For a critical discussion of Boehm's theology of disobedience (cf. also his article "Theologie des Ungehorsams," 66) see Welz, "Dem Unsichtbaren eine Stimme geben: Gebet, Glaubensanfechtung und (Un)Gehorsam," 274-279.

46 According to Kant, Abraham should have answered to the putative divine voice: "daß ich meinen guten Sohn nicht töten solle, ist ganz gewiß; daß aber du, der du mir erscheinst, Gott sei, davon bin ich nicht gewiß, und kann es auch nicht werden, wenn sie [i.e. die göttliche Stimme] auch vom (sichtbaren) Himmel herabschallete" (Kant, "Der Streit der Fakultäten" (1798), 333 footnote). See also Rosenau, "Die Erzählung von Abrahams Opfer (Gen 22) und ihre Deutung bei Kant, Kierkegaard und Schelling," 251-261.

doubted whether the heavenly voice Abraham 'heard' in the first instance was God's voice at all. Levinas has sharply criticized Kierkegaard's idea of a 'suspension of the ethical' in favor of faith in God as presented in *Fear and Trembling* (1843). In prioritizing Abraham's faithful obedience to God, Kierkegaard followed Luther. For Levinas, by contrast, Abraham's listening to the voice that fetched him back to the ethical order is the sublime moment of the drama.[47]

In such conflicts of interpretation, the question of distinguishing spirits becomes crucial: how can we know whether it is God Himself who speaks – in particular if His message is conveyed in human words – and how can we respond properly to the address by a speaker whose identity is dubious? In my eyes, Luther's interpretation of the *Akedah* shows that listening to God's Word involves human responsibility in a double sense: first, the human being must be ready to receive the message; second, if the message turns out to be self-contradictory, the task consists in weighing the words, balancing pros and cons, and taking a stand. In any case, Abraham has done much more than just letting God's address operate in his heart.

Abraham's 'obedience' can neither be explained as pure heteronomy (because he was faced with internally inconsistent commands), nor as autonomy alone (because it was not Abraham who gave himself the ethical law and the promise in correspondence to which he wanted to act). Yet what would be a viable third alternative to heteronomy versus autonomy? I will argue that Levinas can offer this alternative when proposing a process in which heteronomy[48] is transformed into autonomy, and purely passive or receptive responsivity becomes active response-ability.

Before elaborating on Levinas' texts let me illustrate my argument with the help of an everyday episode that a father told me about the time when his son was a little boy. Father and son were walking along a busy road. The boy ran away and, apparently, he did not see the car that was about to drive into the junction towards which he was running. His father asked him to stop. No reaction. Then he shouted: "Simon, stop!" The little boy turned around, and when he saw that his Dad looked worried, he smiled whimsically and said: "I heard you first the second time you called me…" The boy's apologizing comment reveals that he *did* hear both calls, but he ignored the first one. The episode tells us that there is a striking difference between two types of listening, and that *hearing* the call acoustically when it reaches one's ears is not the same as *paying heed* to it.

Furthermore, it becomes obvious that 'blind obedience' to God's call was impossible for Abraham, who went away to Moriah despite the fact that he was aware of God's earlier words, which contradicted the present call. Hearing is a hermeneutical process that affects how the content of a message is received and understood, interpreted and transformed into action (or non-action). It is only because of Abraham's most sensitive attention to God that he in the very last moment, when he already had taken the knife to slay his son, was able to quickly stop himself when the angel of the Lord called out to him, "Abraham! Abraham!" (Genesis 22:11). Other than the boy on the road, Abraham on the mountain had not ignored the first call, and this had brought him into trouble, for other than the father in the aforementioned episode, who wanted to protect his son, God in heaven had endangered Isaac's life by testing Abraham's faith.

Now, hardly anyone today can testify to a divine voice calling out to us from heaven. God's call cannot be registered empirically in the same sense as, for instance, a piece of music can be recorded on a CD. God's call manifests itself in the human response. Only the one who responds can know whether it is an obedient or disobedient response, since God 'speaks' silently to us, and He speaks indirectly, mediated through texts or other people's voices. God's revelation does not condescend 'vertically from above'; rather, according to Levinas, it finds its way to us through inspiration. As Levinas' book title *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (*Of God*

47 Cf. Levinas, "Existence et éthique" in: *Noms propres*, 99-198, here 109.

48 Levinas has at times been portrayed as a defender of the self's "heteronomy" in relation to the (divine or human) Other, cf. Westphal, "The Trauma of Transcendence as Heteronomous Intersubjectivity" in: *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, 75-93. See, for instance, ibid., 81f: "responsibility arises in a heteronomy that Levinas continues to describe as a certain violence" and ibid., 84: "In all these ways, both epistemic and ethical, Levinas portrays transcendence as the trauma of heteronomous intersubjectivity." Edgar, *Autonomy and Heteronomy,* speaks of "heteronomous responsibility" (39f) and "heteronomous assignation" (104) in Levinas (see also ibid., 106-123). Eldracher, *Heteronome Subjektivität*, writes of "Levinas' Dekonstruktion von Autonomie" (138) and "Bewegung der heteronomen Freiheit" (139). Buddeberg, "Du wirst nicht töten. Levinas' Ethik der Verantwortung als erste Philosophie," addresses "Levinas' Verständnis einer fundamental heteronomen Freiheit" (716).

Who Comes to Mind, 1982) suggests, God transcendent can come to our minds – and do so without us having anticipated this event. We cannot grasp or comprehend the thought of infinity, which overflows our finite capacities, but God can show Himself via a detour: by inspiring us to transform our relations with each other.

As Levinas states in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (*Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 1974): "revelation is made by him that receives it, by the inspired subject [...]."[49] It follows that the recipient of the revelation does not merely passively accept what he receives, but is also actively involved in shaping what he receives. By being inspired, human subjects become the authors of what they hear and the interpreters of what they say. Interestingly, Levinas claims that the Infinite has an ethical meaning, signifying out of one's responsibility for the other:

> Obedience precedes any hearing of the command. The possibility of finding, anachronously, the order in the obedience itself, and of receiving the order out of oneself, this reverting of heteronomy into autonomy, is the very way the Infinite passes itself. The metaphor of the inscription of the law in consciousness [*la conscience*] expresses this in a remarkable way, reconciling autonomy and heteronomy.[50]

This passage is thought-provoking, for several reasons: Firstly, the usual succession of (1) an order and (2) obedience is reversed, and this reversal corresponds to the transformation of heteronomy into autonomy. One may, however, ask what 'autonomy' means in this context, if not self-legislation.[51] The opposition to heteronomy suggests that it must imply self-determination, though on the backdrop of already being determined by what comes from 'outside' and is inscribed 'within.' Secondly, the French word *conscience* can be translated either as 'consciousness' or as 'conscience' – which, for Levinas, is the locus of a reconciliation of polar opposites. These opposites do not coincide, nor is the one subsumed or cancelled in the other. But there is an ambiguity tied to inspiration, which 'happens' only if 'exteriority' becomes effective in 'interiority.'

In his 1976 lectures on *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (*God, Death, and Time*), Levinas writes about the act of bearing witness: "The infinitely exterior becomes infinitely interior, in the guise of my voice [...]." [52] For Levinas, the notion that the external becomes internal as a voice, and does so in a "reversal of heteronomy into autonomy," is another aspect of "inspiration: to have received from who knows where, that of which I am the author." [53] Receptivity and productivity are merged in the voice. In imbuing an utterance with one's own voice, human beings are autonomous, self-governing, and self-determined. Accordingly, they receive God's imperious command in their own voices. "The obedience that precedes listening to the other is the anachronism of inspiration" – and, for Levinas, it is the obedience to an order that is issued before it is heard.[54] But how can a person be obedient even before hearing the command? If one hears another's command in one's own voice, one has appropriated it to such an extent that one, as it were, commands and obeys oneself.

And yet, it becomes clear that the self is not in control of this process and has not even chosen to be part of it. Rather, it is "a subject supporting everything, subject to everything, that is, suffering for everyone, but charged with everything, without having had to decide for this taking charge, which is gloriously amplified in the measure that it is imposed"[55] – as Levinas puts it in *Otherwise Than Being*. Levinas continues in underlining the uncanny 'foreignness' of the order that mysteriously becomes 'my own' despite the fact that I cannot account for its origin:

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49 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 156. Cf. Welz, "Resonating and Reflecting the Divine," 169-172.

50 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* 148 / *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, 232.

51 Eldracher, *Heteronome Subjektivität*, 142 n. 42, refers to the above quote in its German translation (where *conscience* is rendered as *Gewissen*) and comments that 'autonomy' here is no longer self-legislation, but rather "Handlungsfähigkeit": the ability to act, which is reconciled with heteronomy.

52 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 197.

53 Ibid., 200.

54 Ibid., 201.

55 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 148.

> The inscription of the order in the for-the-other of obedience is an anarchic being affected, which slips into me 'like a thief' through the outstretched nets of consciousness. This trauma has surprised me completely; the order has never been represented for it has never been presented, not even in the past coming in memory [...].[56]

The imposition of the command is described as an "unheard-of obligation" that is only voiced "after the event" so that I become "the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me"[57]; and it is only in my response that I can detect the saying "in my responsibility for the other."[58] Here Levinas has pinned down the phenomenon of moral self-obligation on the grounds of an always-already-being-obliged, of which we become aware through inspiration. The pattern of bearing witness to the Infinite involves that the appeal of the transcendent Other is understood in my own response: "the 'provocation' coming from God is in my invocation [...]."[59] This brings us to the next point: the intersection between theological and ethical questions.

2.2 The 'voice' of conscience and the link between responsiveness and responsibility

If a human being's self-relation is expressed by the 'voice' of conscience, which one can ignore only at the cost of losing the unity with oneself, how is one's responsibility to be conceptualized in its connection to the responsiveness to a call that apparently comes *both* from 'within' (stemming from *my* conscience) *and* from 'without' (reflecting my relations to others)?

According to Luther, conscience is not autonomous. It is dependent on an external word that is echoed inside and influences everything.[60] In his speech at the Diet in Worms (1521), Luther claims that his conscience is bound by the biblical scriptures.[61] He argues that it is not safe to act against one's conscience and concludes that he therefore cannot revoke what he has written, unless he would be convinced by biblical testimony or the evidence of rational refutation. If we follow Luther and regard conscience as the place where God alone wants to rule on the strength of His word,[62] conscience becomes an instance without further appeal on earth. Then God's Kingdom can be equated with the kingdom of good consciences,[63] whereas a conscience determined by arbitrarily posited propositions must be 'false,'[64] for conscience is supposed to be independent of all human laws and legislation.[65] While human voices remain suspect to

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 149.
59 Ibid.
60 Cf. WA 5, 259, 18-19 (*Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519/21): "Quale enim est verbum, talis populus, talis deus, talis cultus, talis fides, talis conscientia, talia opera et omnia [...]." As to Luther's concept of conscience, see Ebeling, "Das Gewissen in Luthers Verständnis" in: *Lutherstudien,* vol. III, 108-125; Welz, "Das Gewissen als Instanz der Selbsterschließung," 265-284.
61 WA 7, 838a, 6-8 (*Verhandlungen mit D. Martin Luther auf dem Reichstage zu Worms*, 1521): "Victus sum scripturis a me adductis et capta conscientia in verbis dei, revocare neque possum nec volo quicquam, cum contra conscientiam agere neque tutum neque integrum sit." / LW 32, 112: "Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." Luther's last words – "I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen." (LW 32, 113) – are given in German in the Latin text. There is good evidence, however, that Luther actually said only: "May God help me!" Cf. ibid., note 8, with reference to *Deutsche Reichstagsakten*, vol. II: *Deutsche Reichstagsakten unter Kaiser Karl V*, Gotha 1896, 587.
62 Cf. WA 8, 152, 1f (*Von der Beicht, ob die der Bapst macht habe zu gepieten. Der Hundertt und achtzehend Psalm*, 1521): "ynn den gewissen wil er [Gott] alleyn seyn unnd seyn wort alleyn regieren lassen, da soll freyheyt seyn von allen menschen gesetzen."
63 Cf. WA 7, 759, 25-28 (*Ad librum eximii Magistri Nostri Magistri Ambrosii Catharini, defensoris Silvestri Prieratis acerrimi, responsio*, 1521): "nempe veritatem et verbum veritatis et spiritum et simplicitatem, hoc est fidem in Christo et conscientiarum bonarum regnum, quod Christus regnum dei, regnum coelorum, regnum veritatis vocat."
64 Cf. WA 8, 171, 25 (*Von der Beicht, ob die der Bapst macht habe zu gepieten. Der Hundertt und achtzehend Psalm*, 1521).
65 Cf. WA 8, 152, 1f (ibid.).

Luther as possible sources of self-deception, God's Word alone is respected as the true and trustworthy origin of self-disclosure.

Luther designates conscience as locus of intensely felt emotions: it cries, it trembles and is shaken; it is uneasy, anxious, fearful, worried, desperate, or in joy, peace, calmness and certainty.[66] The quality of its emotional experience corresponds exactly to the qualification of the word addressed to it. Conscience is, for instance, scared by God's word of wrath, while it is confident and calm in response to His word of grace.[67] In Luther's descriptions, conscience is a highly ambivalent phenomenon: on the one hand, it is on the side of sin, death and the devil, tormenting and troubling;[68] on the other hand, the peace of conscience can be mentioned in a line with eternal life and bliss.[69]

Luther uses the terms *conscientia, cor, voluntas/velle, intellectus* as synonyms denoting our moving by will and our being-moved in passion – either in *amor Dei,* the love of God, or as *amor sui,* (selfish) self-love.[70] Thus conscience is classified as a sphere of intentionality. Remarkably, Luther has also described this sphere of feeling, judging, willing, planning and deliberating with the Greek word φρόνημα or φρόνησις, which in Aristotle denotes practical wisdom.[71] However, unfortunately, the ethical and political connotations of this term remain underexposed in Luther.

Therefore, let us now turn to a text that highlights the aspects that Luther overlooked: Hannah Arendt's essay "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" (1965-66). In a post-Holocaust situation, Arendt maintains that we have witnessed "the total collapse of all established moral standards in public and private life" – not only in Hitler's Germany but also in Stalin's Russia.[72] She refers to Plato's *Gorgias* where Socrates says: "it would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I direct were out of tune and loud with discord, and that most men should not agree with me and contradict me, rather than that I, being one, should be out of tune with myself and contradict myself" (482b-c).[73] Here, too, musical metaphors are used to describe the (more or less harmonious) relation to oneself. Arendt explains that the self "makes itself heard by talking to me" – and when talking to oneself, one is "two-in-one and there can be harmony or disharmony with the self."[74] Since we can walk away from other people, but not from ourselves, "it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong: if I do wrong I am condemned to live together with a wrongdoer in an unbearable intimacy; I can never get rid of him. [...] I am my own partner when I am thinking,

66 As to the role of emotions, see Brunner, "Ein neuer Mensch? Körperlichkeit, Sinneserfahrungen und Emotionen in der Reformation Martin Luthers," 527-32.

67 WA 15, 426, 27f ("Luc. 8, 4 ff. Dominica in 6ma Euangelium Luce 8," *Predigt am Sonntag Sexagesimä*, sermon held on January 31, 1524): "Cor et conscientia oportet habeat verbum, vel bonum vel malum sit, sic conscientia vel bona vel mala vel fiduciam habet in deum vel contra, non est medium, quod nec deum nec diabolum habeat." Cf. WA 56, 424, 16f (*Römervorlesung (Hs.), Die Scholien*, 1515/16): "Lex conscientiam vrget peccatis, Sed Euangelium liberat eam et pacificat per fidem Christi." Cf. WA 5, 295, 19 (*Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519/21): The Holy Spirit can *voce sola* present God's wrath, whereas in whispering the word of forgiveness, he sets up the person. Cf. WA 1, 189f (*Die sieben Bußpsalmen*, 1517): "biß lange du [...] mir ein gut gewissen machst, *das ich hoer deyn heimlich eynrunen, dir seynd vorgeben dein sund* [...] Niemant sihet es, niemant begreifft es. *Es lest sich horen, und das horen macht ein trostlich frolich gewissen und zuvorsicht gegen gott*." Emphasis mine.

68 Cf. WA 42, 255, 31f (*Genesisvorlesung, cap. 1–17*, 1535/38): "illa scilicet spiritualia mala, quae conscientiam exercent et cruciant: Lex, Peccatum, Mors ipsa." Cf. WA 42, 364, 6f (ibid.): "Quanto autem difficilius conscientia consolationem admittit, quae iram Dei et terrores mortis experta est?"

69 Cf. WA 4, 265, 5-6 (*Dictata super Psalterium*, 1513/16): *requies tua* (*requiem tuam*) is explained by *aeterna vita* (*eternam vitam*), *pax et securitas conscientiae* (*pacem et securitatem conscientiae*). Cf. WA 40/III, 281b, 7-10 and 282, 12-283, 2 ("[In XV Psalmos gradium]," *Vorlesung über die Stufenpsalmen*, 1532/33): "quando conscientia venit et mit einer nadelspitzen, est tod [...] Si leta conscientia et secura de favore et benedictione dei, illi eterna letitia [...]."

70 Cf. W. Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, 210-231 with reference to WA 5, 33-35 (*Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519/21); WA 2, 576, 24ff (*In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas M. Lutheri commentarius*, 1519).

71 WA 2, 571, 7-9 (Ad Gal 5:10, ibid.): "Nam res illa, quae vocatur animi nisus, conatus, intentio, videri, sensus, sentimentum, opinio, sententia, propositum, institutum, consilium, cogitatio, mens etc., hoc verbo graeco exprimitur 'PHRONEMA', 'PHRONESIS'." / LW 27, 341 (*Lectures on Galatians*, 1519): "For that which is called an effort of the mind, an attempt, an intention, a seeming, a feeling, a sentiment, an opinion, a judgment, a resolution, a design, a plan, a deliberation, a mind, etc., is all expressed with this Greek word φρόνημα or φρόνησις." Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI 5 and 8-13. See Ebert, "Phronesis."

72 Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" in: *Responsibility and Judgment*, 52.

73 Ibid., 90.

74 Ibid.

I am my own witness when I am acting."[75] Conscience discloses the perpetrator and warns of possible misdeeds by disturbing the 'inner acoustics,' as it were, i.e. the mood or temper of the self that, like a musical instrument, can be 'untuned' or well attuned to itself and others.

While the impending disharmony with oneself might prevent one from doing certain things, the voice of conscience "will always remain entirely negative" in the sense that it "will never tell you what to do"[76] – a thought that corresponds well to Luther's idea of conscience as *virtus iudicandi* (i.e. a power of judging that evaluates works), whereas Luther rejects the thought that conscience also is a *virtus operandi* (i.e. a power of acting that performs a person's acts).[77] In Luther's view, the criterion for the judgment of conscience should be God's judgment, not our own, and therefore our being *coram deo* is the crucial relation, not our being *coram mundo*.[78] The Day of Judgment has already arrived when we encounter the eternal judge and His assessment in conscience.[79] At this point I would like to ask whether it is adequate to separate these two fora as Luther does, instead of from the very start correlating our being-before-God and our being-accountable to other persons. This would correspond to his treatise *De libertate christiana*, which implies that Christian freedom is not identical with political freedom, but it affords us the proper handling of politics.[80]

In accusing or excusing, conscience primarily passes a judgment on what has been and will be *done*; yet what is at stake and at risk is also the person's integrity as *a responsible agent*. While Lutherans typically fear that the person is reduced to the sum of his or her deeds when judged by the Law,[81] I would like to support Hannah Arendt's intuition that it is necessary to imagine one's possible self-condemnation in order to try to avoid evil-doing and thereby to preserve one's self-respect.

When Luther writes that faith, which listens to the word, not necessarily illuminates the intellect but primarily guides the affect – "Sic enim fides non intellectum illuminat, immo exceat, sed affectum: hunc enim ducit quo salvetur, et hoc per auditum verbi"[82] – he puts a great emphasis on feelings, while the cognitive and practical aspects of one's responsibility seem neglected. Here again, it is instructive to read Arendt's essay. Arendt agrees with the definition of conscience as "a way of *feeling* beyond reason and argument and of knowing through sentiment what is right and wrong."[83] Yet for her, the problem of conscience consists in the fact that feelings of guilt or innocence are no reliable indications of right and wrong because these feelings can also be aroused through a conflict between old habits and new commands: "In other words, these feelings indicate conformity and nonconformity, they don't indicate morality."[84] For this reason, in Arendt's view, conflicts of conscience cannot be resolved through feeling but only through thinking.[85]

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75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 105.

77 WA 8, 606, 32-37 (*De votis monasticis Martini Lutheri iudicium*, 1521): "Conscientia [...] non est virtus operandi, sed virtus iudicandi, quae iudicat de operibus. Opus eius proprium est (ut Paulus Roman. 2. dicit) accusare vel excusare, reum vel absolutum, pavidum vel securum constituere. Quare officium eius est non facere, sed de factis et faciendis dictare, quae vel ream vel salvam faciant coram deo." / LW 44, 298 "For conscience is not the power to do works, but to judge them. The proper work of conscience (as Paul says in Romans 2[:15]), is to accuse or excuse, to make guilty or guiltless, uncertain or certain. Its purpose is not to do, but to pass judgment on what has been done and what should be done, and this judgment makes us stand accused or saved in God's sight."

78 Cf. WA 40/II, 3, 5-8 ("In epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas commentaries, " *Galatervorlesung, cap. 5–6*, 1531/32): "Est libertas a lege, peccatis, morte, a potentia diaboli, ira dei, extremo iudicio. Ubi? in conscientia, Ut sic iustus sim, quod Christus sit liberator et reddat liberos, non carnaliter, non politice, diabolice, sed theologice i.e. tantum in conscientia."

79 Vgl. WA 5, 217, 30 (*Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519/21): "'Argui enim in furore' aliud non est quam erubescere, confundi et ream inveniri coram aeterno iudicio dei conscientiam hominis. Invenitur autem nullius hominis non rea conscientia coram hoc iudicio."

80 See Ebeling, "Der kontroverse Grund der Freiheit" in: *Lutherstudien,* 392.

81 Cf. Jüngel, *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen*, 194.

82 WA 4, 356, 23-25 (*Dictata super Psalterium*, 1513/16). Cf. WA 43, 582, 24-25 (*Genesisvorlesung*, *cap. 8–30*, 1535/42): "et rapimur per verbum et spiritum sanctum, et ipsi adhaeremus per fidem [...]."

83 Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 107.

84 Ibid.

85 Cf. ibid., 108. See Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on conscience and evil," 9, for a critique of Arendt's "overtly intellectualist path" and her "unscrutinized axiom" that thinking is good.

In line with her idea that the greatest evil arises through thoughtlessness, Arendt claims that "wicked people have lost the capacity even to raise the question"[86] – which results in a "lack of judgment"[87] in intellectual, aesthetic, and moral issues. In the concluding section of her essay, Arendt emphasizes the immense importance of exemplary individuals in their function as "the guideposts of all moral thought,"[88] who have an impact on our ability to tell right from wrong. Insofar as our judgments depend on the choice of company when thinking in examples, indifference and the tendency to refuse to judge at all appear as the greatest danger of our times.[89] Let me add: if only the perpetrators had *pondered* their deeds and *imagined* how they will fall back upon themselves who, on the long run, cannot escape the weight of what they have done, but will be identified through their deeds' after-effects on those whose life has been damaged and, not least, on the evildoers themselves – maybe they would not have committed the crime.[90] But does this imply that the 'recipe' against all evils would be the recommendation 'stop and think'? In all probability, this is too naïve. Let us, finally, investigate the implications of Luther's, Levinas' and Arendt's views of the person for the role of religion in public life.

3 Religion in public life

While Luther's *95 Theses*, which he published in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, only concerned Christianity, criticizing objectionable practices in the Roman-Catholic Church, for example the selling of indulgences for redemption, we are today confronted with conflicts between different religions on the one hand, and with a noticeable ignorance of religious beliefs, rituals, and lifestyles on the other. Whether we are religious or not, our fundamental convictions, our conduct and our interaction with others will be shaped by the choices we have made in this regard. Since religion concerns both the relation to the holy, eternal, or divine, and the relation to ourselves, to each other, and the world in which we live, religion must be taken seriously as a phenomenon that embraces and permeates all dimensions of our lives. Religion encompasses human existence as a whole, in its heights and depths, ups and downs. As mentioned, everything is at stake in religion: our view of humanity, our view of the world, and our God-relationship. Therefore, everything can become a bone of contention.[91]

3.1 Reform through (self-)critical thinking and a divinely induced change of heart

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are, in a sense, thrown back to a pre-modern era. In view of terrorists' claims of acting 'in the name of God' and regimes that wage war against those who do not share the same set of beliefs as they do, the Reformation's contribution to critical thinking, which facilitates civil disobedience against holders of power misusing their power, is more topical than ever. One of the Reformation's vital ideas that, in my eyes, is indispensable, is the idea of an *ecclesia semper reformanda*, of a church that is ever to be reformed.[92] However, Lutheran reform-mindedness results in *real* reforms only if everyone who belongs to the church actively contributes to its visible societal and institutional 'body.' This has not always been the case, at least not in Luther's times, but it becomes possible when the church understands itself as an integral part of a democratic public.

86 Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 130.
87 Ibid., 138.
88 Ibid., 144.
89 Cf. ibid., 146.
90 For an exploration of imagination as a means of ethical re-orientation, see Welz, "Facing the Problem of Evil: Visual, Verbal, and Mental Images of (In)Humanity."
91 Section 3 draws on my Danish chapter "Religion," 132-138.
92 This includes, in my view, a critical reformulation of the doctrines of the church. Thanks to Nils Holger Petersen for proposing the felicitous phrase *doctrina semper reformanda*.

But how are we to understand the public and to frame the relevance of religiously shaped anthropology for political theory? As Seyla Benhabib has pointed out, there's an unresolved tension between 'agonistic' versus 'discursive' public space in Arendt's thought. Where the public realm is understood as 'agonistic,' it represents a competitive space of appearance in which moral and political qualities are displayed and shared with others; where the public realm is conceptualized as 'discursive,' freedom emerges when human beings act in concert.[93] Ideally, the agonistic and discursive should be united in order to ensure that we together find the best solution to unavoidable conflicts. Arendt had a good eye for the risk that disagreements are denied and public opinion is assimilated to the government's preferred view when totalitarian ideologies compromise the very way in which human beings think.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt identifies three elements that are peculiar to all ideological thinking: First, in their claim to total explanation, ideologies promise to explain all historical events of the past, present, and future; secondly, ideological indoctrination becomes independent of all experience from which it could learn something new and emancipates itself from the reality we can perceive with our five senses; thirdly, ideological argumentation starts from an axiomatically accepted premise and deduces everything else from it, thus proceeding with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality.[94] The premise could be, for instance, that the Party is always right. Hitler and Stalin were fond of applying stringent logicality à la "You can't say A without saying B and C and so on, down to the end of the murderous alphabet."[95] While totalitarian rulers rely on the tyranny of logicality turning citizens into criminals, there is nonetheless a human power of possible resistance: "the great capacity of men to start something new."[96]

Arendt here takes up Kant's idea[97] that to be free means to be spontaneous, i.e., to be able to begin something new, which is not determined by causal chains. Arendt's definition of freedom runs as follows: "Freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin, just as freedom as a political reality is identical with a space of movement between men."[98] On this background, she argues against terror and ideological thinking:

> Over the beginning, no logic, no cogent deduction can have any power, because its chain presupposes, in the form of a premise, the beginning. As terror is needed lest with the birth of each new human being a new beginning arise and raise its voice to the world, so the self-coercive force of logicality is mobilized lest anybody ever start thinking – which as the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the compulsory process of deduction.[99]

Please note that all features of action described by Arendt – that something new is created, that action takes place within a community, that it opens up a public space and political scene, that it is the condition for the development of identity and the emergence of freedom – are founded in an 'optimistic' anthropology, which is based on the concept of 'natality' denoting the human condition of birth and the capacity to make new and unpredictable beginnings, i.e., to act freely and to do things that have never been done before.[100]

John Kiess discusses Charles Mathewes' concern that Arendt neglects internal and external constraints that limit our freedom, not least the weight of sin, and that she attributes to human beings powers that properly belong to God, so that her account resembles Pelagianism.[101] According to Mathewes, Arendt's theory of action expresses "an absolute faith in the *ex nihilo* spontaneity of human agency."[102] Moreover,

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93 Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," 190-196.

94 See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 470f. Moreover, "the distinction between fact and fiction (*i.e.*, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (*i.e.*, the standards of thought) no longer exist" (ibid., 474) for subjects of totalitarian rule. With this statement, Arendt anticipated the present age of fake news.

95 Ibid., 472.

96 Ibid., 473.

97 Cf. Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (²1794), B 59 [quoted according to standard divisions].

98 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 473.

99 Ibid.

100 See Schanz, *Handling og ondskab*, 94-96. Cf. Kiess, *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, 6, 139-188, and Champlin, "Born Again."

101 Cf. Kiess, *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, 164.

102 Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 177.

he asks how we can remain responsible for our actions at all if they arise from a fountain of novelty and we are surprised by the direction that our willing takes.[103] Kiess defends Arendt by arguing that she does not hold the Pelagian belief that human beings can achieve perfect righteousness without the need for divine grace.[104] The actions and new beginnings she appeals to are "not salvific," but "nonetheless generative and life-giving," ennobling our politics and humanizing our common world.[105]

Like Luther, Arendt draws on the creation theology of Genesis 1 and on Augustine's hamartiology. Yet, in spite of their common sources of inspiration, they end up at almost opposite ends of the spectrum. Luther's anthropology is utterly pessimistic. Let me summarize some key points on the basis of a recent article by Ingolf U. Dalferth: (1) The Protestant Reformation was a spiritual event where God alone (*solus deus*) gained center stage. On the supposition that a revolution in our ways of thinking and a change of heart cannot be brought about by us, salvation was not construed in terms of divine-human cooperation, but rather seen as a creative divine gift changing us from within.[106] (2) "If to be free is to be in control of the goodness of the outcomes, then only God is completely free, as Luther rightly insisted against Erasmus, and we are truly free only where we determine ourselves to choose and act in accordance with the maxim of the good will, as Kant secularized this insight."[107] Our predicament is the weakness of the will and our inability to do the good in the world. Our doing is not under our control, let alone the consequences of our deeds. (3) We cannot freely choose between accepting or rejecting God's grace. In faith we participate in God's freedom and place our trust in God, not in ourselves.[108] Since we cannot will or do anything good without God empowering us, we should live *etsi deus daretur* and confess our dependence on Him.[109]

In other words, we cannot start something new and good on our own; rather, we rely on a beginning beyond human influence and on a God who, as the creator of the universe, is the absolute beginner. Insofar as the renewal of ourselves is not up to us, we remain dependent on God's work in and among us. This Lutheran view of the human person implies that we are never finished with each other, but need to listen to each other in order to be part of the democratic adventure of a polyphonic 'We' that remains open for everyone who wants to come on board. In order to fight fanatics' false divisions between 'us' and 'them,' we need to be willing to include new perspectives and start all over again, ready for repeated reforms of both our respective religion and the society to which we belong.

Only in a public space where everyone has the chance to be heard can a focus on the universally human counteract sectarian tendencies. Basic beliefs cannot just be taken for granted but are debatable. Questions regarding 'a good life,' for instance, need to be discussed in the public, so that one becomes aware of alternative views and discovers one's own fallibility. In this conflict-ridden world, where nobody is perfect, we cannot escape the encounter with those who disagree with us; but precisely by virtue of their disagreement, they can help us to see our own 'blind spots.' So, let us combine Arendt's insight in the necessity of educational reflection in a (both agonistic and discursive) public space with Luther's insight in the limits of human reason and the sinfulness of human willing, which cannot improve itself without God's help – and establish procedures that at the very least allow for that which *can be* in our control: (self-) critical thinking.

3.2 Obedience, the freedom to believe, and the freedom to doubt

Another issue is the question of whether and to what extent obedience is desirable – and how obedience in relation to God interacts with political freedom.

103 Cf. ibid., 175f.
104 Cf. Kiess, *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, 177.
105 Ibid., 179.
106 See Dalferth, "Creative Grace," 548, 550, 553f.
107 Ibid., 555.
108 See ibid., 562.
109 See ibid., 565, 568.

According to Arendt, the argument of those who not only participated willy-nilly in Nazi crimes, but who thought it their duty to do whatever was demanded, "has always been the same: every organization demands obedience to superiors as well as obedience to the laws of the land."[110] For Arendt, the mistake lies in the equation of consent with obedience. If an adult obeys, he or she supports the organization. By contrast, if enough people would have refused support and instead had employed nonviolent resistance in the form of civil disobedience, the regime would not have become as powerful as it did in Germany. In Arendt's view, "there is no such thing as obedience in political and moral matters. The only domain where the word could possibly apply to adults who are not slaves is the domain of religion, in which people say that they *obey* the word or the command of God"[111] because they are not on equal terms with God.

Oswald Bayer explains obedience in relation to God by referring to the following series of events: human beings "are addressed and thus hear and, in responding, themselves come to speak"[112]; and *as* listening beings, we are receptive and spontaneous, free and responsible.[113] The whole of Luther's work – the 'Reformation,' as he occasionally called it – could be summed up in the statement that we are called to freedom.[114] This is freedom and obedience in response to God's call. Bayer draws on *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) in order to demonstrate how freedom as a gift changes the hearer: "First of all there is God's Word. After it follows faith; after faith, love; then love does every good work, for it does no wrong, indeed, it is the fulfilling of the law [...]."[115] God's Word initiates the process of transfiguration that capacitates the listener.

One of the most significant contributions of the Reformation is indeed faith in the power of God's Word and in the transformative power of listening. While the seductive and manipulative power of rhetoric can be abused for political propaganda, the Word of God is not at our disposal, but strikes us from without, as a *verbum externum*. We can pass it on, but its effect is not up to us. When- and wherever the Holy Spirit operates as a hermeneut, God becomes present for us in His Word. Human beings, too, shall encounter each other in speech, on bridges of understanding built on words. In a letter dating from 1524, Luther tells his country's rulers how rebellious groups of people should be handled: the conflicting 'spirits' (*geyster*) shall clash, but if they want to fight with the fist rather than the word, they shall be banished.[116] In the context of the Reformation, the word alone is to be used as a 'weapon' in a spiritual 'battle' where people's hearts shall be won without force. Luther wished that we fight only verbally, by preaching the Word, and with the help of arguments and reasons. In order to identify God's Word, which appears only indirectly, enmeshed in human words, we need to listen attentively, and sometimes we almost have to pick or 'hear out' what was *not* said.

This is possible only if we have at least a minimal form of freedom. As Arne Grøn has pointed out, freedom must include the possibility to act otherwise than one actually did, and, additionally, to be free means to be able to transcend a given situation so that one is not trapped in it.[117] Freedom in terms of autonomy involves the binding of oneself in self-obligation, just as the subject that is its own lawgiver is itself bound by the law.[118] Freedom lies also in the capacity of distancing oneself from oneself, for whenever one is willing something, one becomes absorbed by one's own commitment.[119]

In the same vein, Notger Slenczka defines the 'free will' as a form of self-awareness ("Selbstwahrnehmung"), namely of not being determined from outside ("das *Bewusstsein* des

110 Ibid., 46.
111 Ibid., 48.
112 Bayer, *Freedom in Response,* 125.
113 Ibid., 136.
114 Cf. ibid., 122, with reference to WA 26, 530, 7f.28-34 (*Vorlesung über 1. Timotheus*, 1528) regarding the 'Reformation.'
115 Cf. Bayer, *Freedom in Response,* 86, citing LW 36, 39.
116 Luther, *Ein Brief an die Fürsten zu Sachsen von dem aufrührischen Geist*: "Man lasse die geyster auff eynander platzen und treffen" – "Wyr woellen gerne leyden und zusehen, das yhr mit dem wort fechtet, das die rechte lere bewerd werde, Aber die faust halltet stille, denn das ist unser ampt, odder hebt euch zum lande aus" (WA 15, 219).
117 Grøn, "Frihed i religionsfilosofisk perspektiv," 12.
118 Cf. ibid., 17.
119 Cf. ibid., 24.

Nichtbestimmtseins von außen"), which is the reason why one can attribute responsibility to oneself, affirm it, and take it upon oneself.[120] The latter is, however, not a separate act that would be carried out by virtue of a decision; rather, it is identical with one's willing ("Wollen"), which includes the knowledge of both one's freedom and responsibility. Thus, to will something means to identify with what one does.[121] Having established this, Slenczka declares that the phenomenological reenactment of the religious claim of a *servum arbitrium* results in the assertion of the *un*freedom of the *free will*.[122] This paradoxical assertion makes sense insofar as we can experience from an internal perspective that, whenever we really want something, we cannot determine our willing; yet, since we are not forced to desire this specific thing in this specific way, there is no doubt that our willing can be imputed.

Levinas correlates freedom and responsibility by claiming that we can experience our freedom only in taking upon ourselves our responsibility. Our responsibility does not derive from our freedom; rather, freedom emerges from the responsibility that we have taken upon ourselves.[123] Our responsibility can be understood as the response to an appeal from the Other that speaks to our senses: the Other's visible face or the Other's audible voice, which remind us of our connectedness. As Simon Critchley has put it, for Levinas, ethics "is not an obligation towards the Other mediated through the formal and procedural universalization of maxims or some appeal to good conscience; rather [...] ethics is *lived* as a corporeal obligation to the Other, an obligation whose form is sensibility."[124] Face to face with another person, the ethical is not only expressed through speech, but can also be expressed through physical contact, tenderness, caress – proximity as a language without words. One might object that this works in intimate togetherness, but not in public life with larger institutions that necessarily come 'in-between' self and Other.

Yet, on the other hand, if one loses touch with the other person in his or her singularity and exclusively acts on the basis of principles that coincide with the mainstream or majority opinion, one might, in the final analysis, end up like Adolf Eichmann who became a mass murderer while sitting at his desk and making bureaucratic decisions about the lives of millions of people he never met personally. As Arne Johan Vetlesen has argued convincingly, Eichmann subscribed to *Kadavergehorsam:* he had always done his duty, yet he also "exemplifies a *coinciding* ('*Zusammenfall*') of what is strictly opposed in Kant, namely, his inclinations on the one hand and the commands of the (Nazified, not Kantian) law on the other. [...] Hence, no remorse, no pangs of bad conscience, no combat inwards, no opposition outwards."[125] This quote shows that having a 'bad conscience' can be a good thing, as it can prevent one from committing a crime. Eichmann's conscience had internalized the *Führer*'s norms as law-making authority, which testifies to heteronomy rather than autonomy. Vetlesen remarks rightly that "the laws by which Eichmann lived disallowed for *phronesis,* the act of judgment by which the agent endeavours to bring what is formal and indeterminate to bear upon what is concrete and particular, namely the situation at hand."[126] By contrast, Socrates epitomizes conscience in the sense of an inner voice and "an authority standing above and thus, in times of conflict, *defying* what the many – society around him, including positive law – hold as right and wrong."[127]

Here we are reminded of Acts 5:29 ("We must obey God rather than human beings!"), which dovetails nicely with Arendt's intuition that obedience is appropriate in relation to God, but not in relation to fallible human beings whose judgment might be misguided. However, in the Nazi universe, as in other totalitarian states, the "subversive power of negation, of doubting, of questioning, are all conspicuous by their absence."[128] Might the Lutheran overemphasis of obedience – not only in relation to God, but also to

120 Slenczka, "Von der Freiheit des unfreien Willens," 79.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 82.
123 Cf. Buddeberg, "Du wirst nicht töten. Levinas' Ethik der Verantwortung als erste Philosophie," 716: "Nicht Verantwortung aus Freiheit, sondern Freiheit aus Verantwortung [...]."
124 Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction,* 180.
125 Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on conscience and evil," 17.
126 Ibid., 26.
127 Ibid., 21.
128 Ibid., 26.

temporal authorities – have played a part in building up hierarchies that proved fatal in the Third Reich? And might Luther's insistence on the assurance of salvation contain a danger we should be aware of and try to circuit?

While Luther often stressed the significance of *certitudo* or *Glaubensgewissheit*, the certainty of faith (and, by implication, of salvation),[129] I think it is equally important to underline the necessity of a 'cure of doubt': doubting questions must not be eradicated, for they can be used as an antidote against 'overheated' and 'zealotic' forms of religion (or any ideology taking the place of religion) that have become immune to critique from 'the outside.' The criticism of religion should be recognized as a genuine part of religion when it's at its best. In demanding respect for the most High, religious faith relativizes all other authorities, including our own convictions. If faith is God's work in us, an *opus dei*, as Luther has it,[130] naturally there cannot be anything wrong with it; but as a human, all-too-human undertaking, religion is as ambiguous as everything else that is human.

Instead of just confirming each other in shared beliefs, let us rely on the refreshing, faith-renewing force of doubt. One might ask: 'Is doubt not the power that undermines faith'? Yes, doubt can distance us from faith; but nonetheless, doubt also belongs to faith in that faith only comes to maturity in dispute with our doubts. Faith is directed towards that which is not self-evident or even 'incredible.' Doubt calls attention to the special features of faith: its groundlessness and its difference from empirically based knowledge. That is exactly why the freedom of worship must be protected. If faith overestimates its own power, it pretends to know more than is possible to know about the divine. Fanatic believers are unteachable and unable to correct themselves. While God is beyond any doubt and any faith, we are well-advised in humbly defending not only the freedom of religion, but also the freedom to keep one's doubts.

Conclusion

In this article, I have revisited Luther's view of human (un)freedom and responsibility. I have argued that the dichotomy between heteronomy versus autonomy cannot be sustained if Levinas' description of how we can take upon ourselves our responsibility is right: that God's commandment first becomes phenomenal in our (more or less obedient) response, where heteronomy is turned into autonomy – be it that we decide to avoid the 'call' of conscience or freely obligate ourselves to do what the Other's 'voice' commands. The latter can also 'speak' silently through the face of one's neighbor. Hence, heteronomy and autonomy no longer exclude each other, but follow each other and might merge into each other. Put in Lutheran terms: we are 'called' to freedom, yet in order to actualize it, we first need to be freed from our enslavement by sin. Correspondingly, Luther's claim that we are free *coram mundo*, but unfree *coram deo* (or *diabolo*) needs to be softened, since interhuman relations also offer a *forum divinum* insofar as all dimensions of human existence are affected and transfigured by the God-relationship.

Luther's utterly pessimistic anthropology, which assumes complete unfreedom in relation to God due to the corruption of all human capacities (including reason) and which sees our salvation in God's work alone, while it attributes only 'negative freedom' to human beings who 'sabotage' the *opus dei* by not letting God work in themselves, is challenged by Arendt's notion of natality and her confidence in the political power of reflection (*Nachdenken*) which, in her view, even can resolve conflicts of conscience. The 'banality' of evil lies, for her, in the thoughtlessness of perpetrators who *can*, but do *not want to* think about the consequences of their deeds. She agrees with Luther that there is a defect in a will that only wills

129 WA 7, 24, 12-14 (*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, 1520): "Sihe da, glaub in Christum, yn wilchem ich dir zusag alle gnad, gerechtickeyt, frid und freyheyt, glaubstu, so hastu, glaubstu nit, so hastu nit." In other words: Believe in Christ, then you have it (i.e. the promise of all grace, righteousness, peace and freedom), but if you don't believe, you don't have it. Insofar as unbelief entails a not-having of these vitally important goods, one might even render Luther's remark pointedly as 'Believe it, you have it; doubt it, you are lost…'

130 See, for instance, Luther's sermon of September 27, 1523 (*Predigten des Jahres 1523*) quoted in WA 11, 184, 7-9: "Qui diligit, liber est, non est sub lege, quia fides est opus dei purum, ad quod nihil facimus, hoc iustificat et personam facit bonam absque operibus, nec eciam incipit a nobis, sed a deo."

what is bad. Still, instead of just hoping for a divinely induced change of heart, she relies on the human ability to begin something new, which might induce a turn for the better. Arendt's intellectualist tendencies and her 'voluntarism' in supposing inner freedom to voluntary action without coercion clash with Luther's insight in the pathos-character of willing and thinking, that is, our being-moved-in-willing and our being-prejudiced-in-understanding.

In comparison with Levinas and Arendt, Luther's overemphasis of sin and his undervaluation of the liberating power of imagination and symbolization came to the fore. While Luther's description of *fides ex auditu* suggests the human being's pure passivity[131] in relation to the workings of God's Word, which is supposed to interpret itself within us – if we can take the principle *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*[132] at face value – his own use of metaphors for human unfreedom undermines his phenomenology of listening, and his interpretation of the *Akedah* subverts his scriptural hermeneutics. With reference to Levinas, I showed how the allegedly passive or merely receptive responsiveness to God's call turns into active response-ability, and with reference to Arendt, I tried to reclaim at least a minimalist notion of human freedom, which is not totally tainted by sin: human creativity in the image of God's creative power,[133] which is capable of new beginnings in the spirit of 'the absolute beginner.'[134]

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131 Regarding the complexities in Luther's assumption of pure passivity, see Stoellger, *Passivität aus Passion,* 236-308.

132 Cf. Luther, WA 7, 97, 23 (*Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum*, 1520).

133 Here I allude to the *imago dei* motif, see Welz, *Humanity in God's Image,* in particular Chapter 2.

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